DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 497 CS 504 616

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TITLE Stand Up and Write: Completing the Freshman Communications Course.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Speech Association (Chicago, IL, April 12-14, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Curriculum Development; Curriculum Enrichment; Dormitories; English Curriculum; Higher Education; *Integrated Activities; *Public Speaking; *Speech Curriculum; Speech Instruction; Student Projects; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Freshman Composition

ABSTRACT

Members of the English and speech faculty at Michigan Technological University combined and coordinated their ideas to find a way to introduce the basics of oral communication into the composition course. The course itself is structured according to the quarter system, in which basic composition is taught in the first term, research methods and persuasive writing in the second, and theme papers in the third. Oral reports are placed in the fourth quarter. Each class was divided into six groups, each of which would investigate and report on print, film, radio, television, records, or advertising. Students outlined proposals and the form their reports would take, since a class-long oral report on the mass media was required. Among the activities students engaged in to prepare for their presentations were writing papers analyzing various aspects of media presentation, interviewing media specialists, engaging in self-criticism, and evaluating peers. Based on student response, the course seemed successful in aiding engineering students to express thoughts clearly and coherently in oral presentations and interviews and to think quickly in public situations, both of which are rapidly becoming important to technical graduates. (CRH)

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Stand Up and Write: Completing the Freshman Communications Course

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CS 504 616

STAND UP AND WRITE: COMPLETING THE FRESHMAN COMMUNICATIONS COURSE

As is becoming increasingly obvious, students' chances for success in the world outside academia depend greatly on their abilities to communicate and their skills in using the written and spoken word. If we, as teachers, are to help our students achieve a mastery of their language so that they can function more effectively in the ever-changing world of 1984, we must be sure that they are as adept at speaking and listening as they are at reading and writing.

All too often, however, most of the time in the college classroom is spent on writing and its applications. This is understandable as most curricula require composition rather than speech courses. From the commercial and technological sectors, however, the repeated message is increasingly clear: teach more speech! The reasons for this are obvious as more and more frequently the business person or technical professional must translate written concepts into oral reports: must present, propose and convince through the spoken word.

Still, this demand can be difficult to meet, as required courses take up most of the undergraduates" time, leaving them little opportunity for experiencing oral communication in their normal class loads. At a school such as Michigan Tech, where course requirements are dictated by an outside accrediting agency, this problem is compounded. According to the Engineering Accreditation Code, speech courses, as such, are considered skill-centered and therefore cannot count towards graduation. Thus, the majority of our students, who are engineering majors, are cut off from formal speech courses even though they are required by the same agency to take nine hours of composition, which is listed as a humanities rather than as a skills course.

Living with this policy has become increasingly difficult over the years as surveys from alumni and advisories from the placement office have all indicated that the abilities to think on one's feet

and express one's thoughts clearly and coherently are becoming essential skills for the technological graduate. Such a restriction is also in direct conflict with our departmental goal of giving our students complete preparation in all communication skills. Yet, even within our department, there has been some resistance to any change. Though we are listed as a Humanities Department, the majority of the faculty are English teachers by training who are more comfortable with and adept at teaching writing. Those teachers proficient in the teaching of speech constitute a small minority within the department who have enough trouble staffing their own courses without attempting to reach all students. In addition, many of our faculty, while acknowledging the necessity for providing some form of speech instruction in the classroom, are hesitant to attempt it because they are unfamiliar with the procedures and methods necessary for effective instruction.

Because Tech is a small, isolated school at which the faculty has had to learn to be adaptive, imaginative, and flexible, we soon realized that any solution was going to have to come from within as there was neither the money nor the inclination to hire more faculty or introduce extensive new programs. Since almost all members of our department teach sections of the required composition course, this seemed to be the most logical place to attempt a new approach. The two of us, therefore, an English instructor and a speech teacher, combined our expertise and coordinated our ideas to find a way to introduce the basics of oral communication into the composition course.

Tech's composition course is structured around a quarter system in which basic comp is taught in the first term, research methods and persuasive writing in the second, and theme papers in the third. Because of the extensive requirements of the first two courses, we decided that the logical place for oral reports was in the final quarter. The papers of this class center around literature or mass media depending on the preferences of the instructor. Since both of us found that the study of media appealed more to our engineering students, we had no difficulty in choosing the area we would use. We should also add that the two of us were involved with special

sections of freshman comp called Dorm English, which gave us a unique setting in which to try our experiment. Dorm English is a program which grew out of the realizations that students will concentrate more on their writing skills if they do not have to adapt to the whims of three different instructors during their freshman year and also that most undergraduate writing in done not in the classroom, but in the residence hall. If conferences, therefore, are to be really effective, they should also be held in the dorms where the students encounter most of their composition problems. For these reasons, four sections of freshman comp are regularly scheduled into one of the dormitories where facilities are available for classes and office hours. These sections are restricted to residents of that hall, meet in the building, stay together for the entire years and meet weekly outside of class hours with their instructors who hold office hours on the premises. Since these students had worked together for most of the year and were comfortable with each other, this seemed the ideal environment for introducing speech to the freshmen.

In planning our approach and organizing our material, what we had known for some time became increasingly obvious: oral and written communication, while different, had many things in common which could be used in structuring our course. Since the students had been writing for two terms, they were already familiar with the basic steps of choosing a subject, analyzing an audience, narrowing a topic, finding material, formulating a thesis and organizing the content. These skills could all be applied to their speeches as well. Further, the students had also obtained experience in preparing papers aimed at entertaining, informing, and persuading their readers, goals with which public speakers also need to be familiar. Much more knowledge and experience, however, were required to turn them into effective oral communicators. Therefore, to prepare the students for the more formal presentations of the last quarter, they were gradually introduced to aspects of speech during the first two terms. As part of class procedures during the strictly composition courses, each student was required to do some extemporaneous narration (usually anecdotes and humorous stories) as well as to orally analyze papers and

paragraphs which were projected on a screen in front of class. These simple exercises, combined with healthy amounts of class discussion helped prepare the way for the more formal coverage to come.

At the beginning of the third quarter, both of us introduced our classes to the various aspects of mass media under six main headings: print, film, radio, tv, records and advertising. Every class would eventually be divided into six groups, each of which would have to investigate and report on one of these major areas. For some classes, the reports would have to be presented in two ways, as a written paper submitted to the teacher and as an oral and visual program given to the rest of the class. After preliminary lectures discussing the history of each form, we had the students gather into groups of their choice and begin holding discussions on the possible subjects which could be covered. At this point, a logical question arises: how did we convince the students to organize themselves neatly into those divisions if everyone decided that television was the only possible topic? The solution was that a limit was placed on the number of students that could be in each group, and each student had to have second or even third preferences. After that, it was up to them to work out the logistics--topic selection and division, etc,--through a brainstorming session held in class. If other sessions were needed, more class time, if possible, would be allotted for them, or further meetings could take place on the students' own time. If these efforts failed, both us were ready to step in and mediate to prevent mayhem if the need arose. Fortunately, we have yet had to encounter such an emergency.

Once the groups were established, the students had a week to formulate their proposals as well as outline the form which their reports would take. Almost at once, they began to encounter some of the differences between speaking and writing. Since part of the assignment required that each group present a class-long oral report on mass media--featuring audio-visual aids, such as slides, tapes, films, charts, projections, models, objects or even skits--the students soon realized that while many of their papers could remain rather generalized, their oral reports had to get quite specific if they were to adequately cover their topics. To encourage them in these

viewpoints, we each met several times with the individual groups both in and out of class to guide them in their planning and assist them in their organizing.

As the term progressed, the class continued meeting as a whole and also in groups. During the regular class periods, both of us covered general aspects of the media through lectures which also demonstrated the techniques and devices we wished the students to employ in their own reports. That is, we presented oral coverage of several media issues--such as, the influence of advertising on the print media, radio, and television; or the emphasis placed on the teenage audience by the film industry--illustrated with slides, tapes, video cassettes and records. At the end of these multi-media spectaculars, we would review the procedures we had used and explain the techniques of our presentations. Class activities during the middle of the term also included visits from media specialists from the instructional resources office and the photo services lab as each group was responsible for producing its own illustrative materials. The students were also encouraged to visit these university services on their own and to seek interviews with other university and community people who could aid them in their research: theater owners, radio and tv personalities, and newspaper reporters as well as faculty who taught in these areas. Usually after the presentations during this section of the course, the groups would meet again and begin working on the final form which their reports would take, paying close attention to what audio and visual aids might be needed.

One might assume that with the emphasis placed on oral presentations, the written aspect of the class might tend to have been neglected. We tried, however, to make provision for that. Since the course was still officially part of the composition sequence, the students were required to write several papers during the ten weeks--each of which was related to a division of the mass media (print, electronic, film). This also helped demonstrate the essential differences and similarities between the two forms of communication. Concerning audience analysis, the students quickly learned that while their papers were aimed primarily at one certain kind of individual (the

instructor), their presentations would have to appeal to a large number of their peers. They also learned that while feedback from their papers was almost exclusively in the form of written comments returned some time after the written assignment was completed, the reaction to their oral reports would be much more immediate, coming during their delivery and directly after, and possibly more pointed as after three terms, the members of the class were not hesitant about criticizing each other.

During the sixth and seventh weeks of the quarter, final conferences were held with each group to complete arrangements for the reports. Also, while the various aspects of visual and vocal delivery had been brought up to the class during the preceding weeks, it was at this time that more specific explanations were given regarding such things as the differences between manuscript, memorized and extemporaneous forms of presentation; the importance of proper clothing, body movement, posture, and gesture; and the necessity for effective eye contact and vocal control (pitch, volume, pronunciation, tempo).It was here too that the class members were informed about such concepts as paralinguistics and body language, and the effects that stage fright might have on their presentations. Where possible, films, tapes, and live presentations were employed to further clarify these concepts. In addition, some discussion took place concerning the differences which props and background arrangements could make in successful oral communication. Finally, the students were advised to rehearse thoroughly and to allow time for emergencies which would have to be covered as quickly and unobtrusively as possible, emergencies which they need not be concerned with when preparing their written efforts.

The last three weeks of the course were then given over to the presentations themselves and to final evaluations. The results went beyond our most optimistic expectations. While not all of the quality of Broadway productions, most of the reports were excellent: thoroughly prepared, well delivered and cleverly staged. Almost every group rearranged the classroom for their own purposes, decorated it appropriately and even showed up in formal or other dress calculated to add to the effect of the presentation. One group--

using film clips and video tapes, a model city complete with exploding buildings and burning trees as well as a staged barroom brawl employing break-away furntiture, sugar bottles and stage blood--gave a thorough and interesting report on the history and development of special effects in the media. Along the way, they learned some important lessons on the importance of timing and speaker-audience relationships in an oral report. Other group presentations--such as one about violence in kidvid which featured speakers dressed as babies, huge blocks used as desks and video tapes of some of the more violent Saturday morning cartoons--were equally as impressive.

There were, of course, problems, as some students insisted on hiding behind their props, addressing the screen, staring at the rug, or mumbling into their notes, but for the most part they had learned their lessons well. Even these shortcomings were put to good use as we video-taped most of the reports and could thus show the students exactly where they had made their mistakes and how these weakened the effect of the report. Many times our commentary was not even necessary as the members of the group were quick to spot the shortcomings on their own while watching themselves on the monitors.

Evaluations and grades were given out in two stages: in brief sessions immediately after each presentation and during longer conferences scheduled during the last week. At these, the video tapes (which the students had already viewed on their own) were commented on and extensive analyses offered on the effectiveness of the report and various ways in which it could have been improved. The students themselves also offered their evaluations of their own and their classmates' performances, and the agreement on which reports were the best seemed to be almost universal. These judgements were based not only on the content of the projects, but also on the effective manner in which they were presented. Numerous comments were heard to the effect that "if only we had rehearsed more" or "if only we had given more time to the videos." As almost all the students agreed that they could have improved their performances if they had worked more on their speaking abilities, from our point of view, the experiment had been successful.

For anyone contemplating this approach, some preliminary considerations are necessary. Before attempting this kind of experiment, much preparation and planning must be done. Since we depended upon the cooperation of so many people--from the residents of the dorm to the media specialists of other departments, advance coordination was essential if anything was to be accomplished. We had to be sure, for example, that not all 120 students would arrive in photo services at the same time or that more than one group would try to edit their video tapes during the same week-end. With advance warning to those concerned, however, and with basic directions to the students, most of these difficulties can be avoided. For our part, both of us were impressed at just how cooperative everyone was in accepting the challenge and meeting the responsibilities. Even the best laid plans, however, do go wrong and complications must be expected.

Cooperation between the instructors regarding the successful introduction of this approach was also essential as we met, discussed and pooled ideas many times before and during the course. We also tried to help each other out as much as possible sharing expertise and on occasion visiting each other's classes to help in covering course material. For instance, once, one of us presented a slide-tape report on American muscial comedy to the other's classes not only to introduce the information, but also to demonstrate one method of integrating the audio-visual aspect into the report.

As is also obvious, some extra work was necessary on the part of instructors and those who were assisting us. This involved several outside meetings with students and increased office hours as well as conferences with instructional resources people and consulatations with each other as to the progress of the course. We feel that the additional time and effort were well worth it. The student evaluations have been positive and enthusiastic, as the majority of the classes have felt that they have achieved something, built up their self-confidence, and improved their speaking abilities. From our point of view, it has also been satisfying to know that in spite of accrediting regulations and limited personnel and facilities, we have succeeded in introducing some basic speech concepts into our composition course, which could now

accurately be described as a communications course.

Perhaps the most positive comment about this approach came in the form of a conversation with a former student who had come in to report that on his plant trip for a job interview, he had been required to give an oral presentation for his prospective employers. Before taking our course, he admitted, he probably would have thrown up at the thought of having to speak in front of other people. After doing his 103 project, however, he was able to handle the interview with ease. While not all our efforts have been that successful, and while it is true that improvements (such as more fully integrating the elements of speech, mass media and composition into a ten week course) can still introduced into our program, we still believe that adoption of this approach can achieve results similar to those discussed above.

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